Peril in the West: Enforcing environment laws gets scary

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Rangers, other staffers harassed and threatened by angry people from 'wise use' groups

Someone has threatened to kill Forrest Cameron, and to harm his wife and children.

Cameron, the manager of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, knows who threatened to kill him, and why. He doesn't know who called his home in Princeton, Ore., to harass his wife and daughters. But he assumes it's for the same reason he says Dwight Hammond threatened to shoot him: because Cameron was enforcing the law.

So was Tim Tibbetts. This was in Reserve, N.M., when Tibbetts was still with the Phoenix office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Tibbetts had just explained the Engangered Species Act at a public forum and he'd gotten into his car in the parking lot of the Catron County Building, he remembered, when someone opened the door and said something about blowing his head off.

"That did cross the line" said Tibbetts, a biologist who now works at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona.

In California, activists issue instructions on how to harass federal officials. "Find out where the ranger lives," urges a newsletter providing information on how to picket outside a ranger's home using "outrageous signs" that say "in lurid terms what a rat Ranger Smith is."

In Reno, the warnings were not verbal. On Halloween night 1993, someone tossed a bomb on the roof of the Bureau of Land Management's state headquarters.

Enforcing environmental laws has become increasingly perilous in the West. Park and forest rangers, Fish and Wildlife Service officials and staff members for the Bureau of Land Management report an increasing number of threats and harassment incidents. Enforcement officers for state fish and game departments also have been threatened.

So far no one has been hurt, and the law enforcement officials generally shrug off the threats as empty posturing. But in at least one case, state and federal officials surrendered to a threat of violence.

"We had a visit set up in June to do a major ground-water assessment" of a project on federal land in Gila National Forest, said Bob Salter of the New Mexico Department of Environment. "At the 11th hour, the forest supervisor contacted us and requested that we back off because of threats of an armed confrontation."

Western resource law enforcers also acknowledge that some of this behavior is not new, that the region has always bred a few angry people who crossed the line that separates a rugged individualist from a violent renegade.

But this time it isn't just isolated angry individuals. The outbursts and the intimidation are orchestrated, often by outsiders using sophisticated, high-tech methods of organization and persuasion.

This time, in short, it's politics.

The threats in New Mexico are not just part of a political movement. They come from local government. The Catron County Commission adopted a resolution earlier this year warning that proposed federal rangeland reforms could lead to "physical violence." And with the approval of county officials, residents have formed a quasi-offical "militia."

According to Salter, that militia threatened to "force an armed confrontation" last June if the state Environment Department and the Forest Service insisted on inspecting the water surrounding the proposed re-activation of a gold mill by local rancher Dick Manning.

Though the mill is on public land, Salter said, Manning has blocked it off. So Salter slid under Manning's gate to do inspections—and was told that if he did it again he "would be arrested and put in jail" under the terms of one of Catron County's new ordinances.

Catron County has passed a collection of laws that together represent a modern version of Nullification, last espoused by John C. Calhoun in the 1830s. The county is not likely to fare any better than Calhoun, who lost his argument that state "interposition" could block enforcement of a federal law within that state's borders.

The Oregon threats also are connected to a political movement. After Cameron arrested rancher Dwight Hammond last Aug. 3 on charges that he interfered with federal officers, some 400 people gathered at the Senior Center in the nearby town of Burns. Most of them were local residents, but Chuck Cushman was there too.

Cushman is the director of the American Land Rights Association, one of the oldest of the "wise use" groups, which oppose environmental protection. According to a report in the Aug. 12 Portland Oregonian, Cushman warned against violence. But he also urged his audience to maintain pressure on federal officials.

"One of the things they did," said Cameron, "they handed out a list of key people on our staff and their home numbers and sought to make life fairly miserable for the federal employees."

Cameron said his wife was so frightened by telephoned threats against their children that she left home for several days while he was away.

In a telephone interview, Cameron also said Hammond had threatened to shoot him at the time of the arrest.

The professional politicians who are helping to organize the anger, and sometimes to orchestrate the threats, are a disparate bunch. Some of the "wise use" groups are well financed and well connected.

Leaders of one of the largest groups, People for the West, have bragged that they get most of their money from mining and forest products firms. Others are sup-

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ported by the real estate industry. Still others are essentially one-person operations, with letterheads but no members to speak of, which scramble to stay in existence through speaking fees and selling advertisements for newsletters that come out irregularly.

Their connections are varied. On one extreme, they flirt with associates of Lyndon LaRouche, Rev. Sun Myung Moon and even with white supremacists such as James "Bo" Gritz, once an ally of David Duke.

But they also have good friends in the Republican Party. Western Republican leaders such as Sen. Larry Craig of Idaho and Gov. Fife Symington of Arizona attended "wise use" meetings earlier this year.

The threats and the attempts at intimidation reflect another recent Western reality. The 1980s, rather like the 1880s, were a time of lawlesness in this part of the country, lawlessness from both sides of the resource-use dispute.

Environmental extremists—"eco-terrorists"—arguably started it years ago by driving large nails into trees that were to be logged. The nails can break the teeth of a chain saw and injure the person wielding the saw.

From the other side, much of the lawbreaking had the tacit support of the U.S. government. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, Forest Service officials and other federal agents often were prevented from enforcing the laws if timber, mining or ranching interests objected.

When Jack Ward Thomas, the new Forest Service chief, told his employees last year that part of their job was to "obey the law," he was implicitly acknowleding that his agency had not always followed that practice in the past.

The threats of violence and intimidation in California also come from a political organization. The Sahara Club, made up largely of off-road vehicle recreationists, is one of the smaller "wise use" organizations. In fact, it may be one of the one-man bands of the movement, the one man being Rick Sieman, its president and the author of its newsletter.

Most of the newsletter's suggestions for intimidation are directed against environmentalists, not federal officials. But often there is no distinction. The newsletter urges followers to disrupt meetings and "use dirty tricks," such as calling adversaries late at night.

"Do not do anything illegal," it says. But then it brings up—without specifically advocating such moves—steps such as "letting the air out of all four tires," squeezing hot pepper in someone's face and getting "large and aggressive people ... to follow eco-freaks out of the meetings and confront them in dark parking lots."

Carl Livingston, chairman of the Catron County Commission, says he does not think the federal government has the right to own land, and officials of several counties in the West have retained lawyers to argue this in the courts.

Considering that Congress has been making decisions on public lands for as long as there has been a Congress, it seems unlikely the U.S. Supreme Court would deem federal land ownership unconstitutional. But the counties' efforts illustrate the depth of the anger of many Westerners. They also illustrate its limits. Catron County's population is about 2,600. Harney County, Ore., where Burns is located, has about 7,000 people. Neither county is growing.

For all its fervor and intensity, the anti-government, anti-environmental "wise use" movement emits a forlorn aura. It has about it the air of people who think the world has passed them by. And perhaps it has.

"There's a certain mentality here," said Bob Fisher, a realtor in Reserve and one of the leaders of Catron County's attempt at rebellion. "We want it to be like it was in 1900. We want to cut down trees. We want to raise cattle."

The trouble is that not all those trees and cattle are needed anymore. The ranchers and loggers of the West are learning what the auto workers of the Midwest learned 15 years ago—that the human race has largely solved the production problem, and that all the necessary goods can be produced using fewer people and fewer acres.

That's a hard reality to accept.